

Verleihung der Beccaria-Medaille an Prof. Per-Olof H. Wikström, Cambridge

Klaus Boers

Dear Per-Olof, dear colleagues,

Today, we are honouring Per-Olof Wikström for his many years of research on the development of delinquency over the life course. Developmental and life-course criminology is a central area of criminological research. Why?

1) It enables fundamental research: only with longitudinal data can causal theories ultimately be tested. 2) Its practical relevance: Only with longitudinal data can the effects of preventive measures or police and judicial interventions be evaluated in a quasi-experimental way. Tonight, I will talk about the aspect of theory-testing.

In 1997, when Per-Olof Wikström left the University of Stockholm because he had been appointed a Lecturer and shortly afterwards a Professor at the Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge, developmental and life-course criminology had long been dominated by the theory-free multifactorial search for risk and later also protective factors. Such an inductive approach can, of course, help to explore an unknown field. Karl Popper called this “Erkenntnispsychologie”. And most of developmental criminology was quite satisfied with this search for correlative markers of delinquency. However, it is well known that after this first inductive step, the actual, the deductive work begins. On the basis of inductively discovered relationships, theories can be developed and subsequently subjected to empirical testing and falsification.

Of course, criminological theories have already existed for a long time. But they usually focused on only one of the three macro-, meso- or micro-structural levels to explain human action. And they were and are not particularly elaborate in terms of the exact causal mechanisms. What was urgently needed was a theory that integrated all levels of explanation and that also worked out the causal mechanisms in a much more precise and empirically testable way.

Per-Olof approached this challenge analytically: Over the past 25 years, he has step by step developed the Situational Action Theory, which in a unique way spells out the decision-making process for or against delinquent behaviour as a causal perception-choice process. Delinquency is understood as the breaking of moral rules defined by criminal law. In German, one would rather speak of social rules in this context. It is crucial that delinquent behaviour is understood as guided by moral rules and not by self-interest, as the Control Theory, referring to the Rational Choice Approach, assumes. And the theory is not offender oriented. It explains delinquent events.

The perception-choice process is based on the interaction of two elements: 1) the propensity, rooted in moral rules and the ability to exercise self-control and 2) the exposure to opportunities and frictions or provocations in environmental settings. And 'situation' does not refer to the social environment but arises from the interaction of the personal propensity and the circumstances of a specific environmental setting. The emergence of delinquent behaviour then depends on the deliberate choices an individual makes in the face of perceived opportunities for action, as well as on internal and external controls.

Once these direct causes of offending had been identified, the next step – by the way in line with Coleman's macro-micro model of a sociological explanation – was to work out the causes of the causes, that is: What conditions the perception-choice process? On the one hand, the psycho-ecological and also neuro-cognitive learning processes for the development of personal propensities. On the other hand, the macro- and meso-structural, that is, the social status and social relation-based selection mechanisms that causes an individual to end up in a particular environmental setting.

In a final step, the developmental perspective has been worked out as the Developmental Ecological Action Model. This model regards delinquent behaviour, especially persistent delinquent behaviour that may intensify to a criminal career, as a dynamic process and not, as in Moffit's well-known approach or in control theory, as a symptom of a stable personality trait. This resulted in a comprehensive and unique aetiological theory that integrates sociological, social- and cognitive-psychological mechanisms to explain delinquent behaviour.

However, an analytical approach is not just about theory, but also about theory testing. To this end, Per-Olof and his team started the Peterborough Adolescence Delinquency Study (PADS+) in 2003, a 12-wave panel study ranging

from age 13 to 24, for which also innovative tools, such as the space-time budget to measure criminogenic exposure, have been developed.

The findings of extensive empirical analyses, including growth mixture models and structural equation modelling, show, in line with many other studies, that stability in delinquent behaviour is temporary, and that change, the distance from crime, shapes the developmental pattern of delinquent behaviour, especially in the case of persistent intensive offending. Change is thereby not an age effect, like a simple biological “maturing out”. Rather, changes in delinquency are driven by changes in the criminogenic propensity as well as by changes in the criminogenic exposure. Changes are bad for prediction, but good for prevention. And thus, the findings often also provide practical advice on crime prevention. Due to its empirical testability, the situational action theory has meanwhile been applied in numerous studies and countries to investigate various forms of delinquent behaviour. The list of countries ranges from Columbia over Europe to Africa and even China, and studies have also been conducted in Austria and Germany.

Per-Olof, your work is an excellent lifetime achievement and a brilliant piece of analytical criminology, of theory and theory testing. And finally, as not to forget the most important things: Per-Olof is of course a Professor of Ecological and Developmental Criminology at the University of Cambridge and Malmö University, a Fellow of the British Academy, as well as of the Center for Advanced Studies in Stanford, and of the American Society of Criminology. He published numerous articles, book chapters and books. And he has been awarded an honorary doctorate, the Sellin-Glueck Award, the Stockholm Prize, and the European Criminology Award.

Dear Per-Olof, it is not only that we are honouring you with the Beccaria Medal, but that, by accepting it, you in turn honour this prize in a long line of distinguished criminologists. We can only express our and my best congratulations.